

The last word Disharmonic convergence

by the editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 34, March, 1989, pp. 123-24

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1989, 2006

In Reagan's second term several conservative intellectuals published articles, books, and speeches calling for a return to "cultural literacy," or college basics, meaning re-establishing the traditional 20th century humanities curriculum. According to conservatives, the Great Western Tradition had been displaced by new multicultural and interdisciplinary programs such as Afro-American studies, Chicano studies, women's studies, popular culture and film studies. Ignoring the fact that typically such programs are under-funded and understaffed, and in many cases built through overtime and dedication, the critics did notice something true.

The basis for much film and other media arts studies in the US appeared with the significant shift in academic enrollments in the 1970s that decreased traditional humanities and arts areas, especially English and foreign languages, and swelled majors in other areas, such as communications, poli-sci, and business. The long reign of language, literature, and history as the prestige curriculum in academe came to an end in the late Sixties less because of the criticism and antics of the New Left and counterculture, and more because the service sector economy found other majors well suited to the imperatives of a declining imperial, postindustrial economy. As the older U.S. pattern of low cost, subsidized, higher education changed into today's personal debt-financed one for most students (U.S. college grads' average debt on graduation is \$24,000), they looked for courses that would give them a job rather than an appreciation of the patriarchial caucasian past. By voting with their enrollment cards, they undercut the need for language, literature, and history classes.

The end of print culture dominance seems like the end of civilization itself to conservative ideologues such as Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and William Bennett, who can't seem to understand that because in a period of industrial decline, the US remains successful at exporting entertainment and images, it makes sense that those areas of the university which train students in the culture and consciousness industry will benefit at the expense of those areas linked to mechanical technologies. Nor do conservatives want to face the flip side of Reagan era. The Great Communicator created the ideological space that made their

conservative claims plausible and respectable, but he also brought forth the consummate corporate man of the 80s: Ollie North scamming Iranian arms deals, raising money for the contras with his slide show, and shredding and lying in order to protect a Movie Star President.

Another conservative charge, that the now-tenured academic left ruthlessly dominates the universities and colleges, proves to be equally dubious on inspection, but recognizes a new development. Following the McCarthy era's silencing of dissent, there has been a broadening and expansion of radical discourse in higher education and in the broader intellectual world. At times this stems largely from students and activist teachers insisting on the relevance of new concerns in the classroom. At other times disciplinary boundaries change or crack as new people and different views emerge. The introduction of media, along with issues of gender, race, class, and multicultural analysis into the curriculum redefines the terrain of intellectual radicalism as the introduction of new content opens the way for new forms of political analysis and discussion.

Film culture in the Fifties and Sixties began outside the university curriculum and often served as a cultural opposition to the dominant values of Cold War America. For many intellectuals in the post WW2 era, European art cinema and a struggling independent film movement encompassing experimental and documentary modes provided a look at cultures and ideas organized differently than official America. It was a field which included the dense international film culture of New York city, and a significant section of its intellectuals, as well as people sustaining a film society or small art theatre in a midwest college town. Film provided a glimpse of other peoples, other possibilities, other emotions, other lifestyles than those sanctioned by the official U.S. blandness.

Media culture today is vastly larger. The industrially organized consciousness and consumption culture of the U.S. has its own caste of media producers and manipulators. For a specific part of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia, media is or is closely related to their employment: in film, TV, video, advertising, public relations, performance, etc. For an overlapping group, cinema/ video is a significant leisure/ entertainment/ cultural pursuit. These are people who attend festivals, art house screenings, film clubs, retrospectives, sponsored screenings for fundraising or educational purposes, etc. They like to also read about what is going on in newspapers, magazines, and books. If they're 20 or 30 something, they probably took several film courses in college. They pay attention to TV movie reviewers. Though more verbal and print oriented, they follow a similar pattern to more working class people who like to rent lots of movies to see at home on their VCR and who find out what's new and good from word of mouth, Entertainment Tonight and cable tv's current entertainment channels.

In such circumstances, the nature of film culture changes, expands, and blends into other areas of cultural concern. And the full-fledged emergence of film and tv studies in the universities is part of that. The existence of professors calls forth conference papers, articles, reviews, and books. The existence of graduate and undergraduate students calls forth consumers for academic production. But

something bigger than that is happening throughout the English speaking academic world right now. There is a huge expansion of work in the general area of cultural studies, and expansion which itself breaks down disciplinary boundaries between high and low culture, performing and fine arts, between critical and historical methodologies, between aesthetic and sociological analysis.

The result is a disharmonic convergence of people from very different academic disciplines, methodologies, suppositions, and experiences. To some extent media studies have always drawn investigators from other areas, but what we see now is a quantitative change which is producing a qualitative shift. The political significance of this is that there is a widespread ferment in the area of radical cultural criticism and the creation of a field which includes the stiffly academic and the informally journalistic, the delicate import and the hardy native, the theoretical and the experiential.

Today the U.S. left has consistently intelligent and interesting cultural reportage and criticism in its two major weekly newspapers, *In These Times* and *The Guardian*. Other major forums for new cultural analysis such as the *Village Voice* frequently publish progressive writers. Other signs of a resurgent cultural critique include new culturally oriented left publications such as *Borderlines*, *Cineaction*, and *Fuse* from Canada, new journals which stress the social nature of mass culture phenomena such as *New Formations* (UK), *Cultural Studies* (Australia) and *Cultural Critique* (US). At the same time, some long standing publications have survived to the present and still contribute to innovative analysis such as *Screen* (UK), *New German Critique*, and *Camera Obscura*, while others have revived their relevance such as *October* with its recent AIDS and cultural activism issue. Monthlies such as *Afterimage* and *The Independent* have grown to be central sources for news and discussion of the independent media scene. University presses publish major anthologies such as Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Illinois) and Don Lazare's *American Media and Mass Culture* (California).

Conservatives have a right to be worried about the expansion of radical intellectual thought in the area of culture and communications. It's clear that the momentum of new and interesting cultural analysis falls on the left side. Conservatives, wandering in their Gutenberg wilderness, haven't seen the superhighway of mass culture much less the bike path of critical cultural studies. Thus for the near future, at least, the continued expansion of mass culture analysis seems to fuel an alternative to George Bush's view of "a kinder and gentler America." There is a generation of professors now in the universities who are perhaps more liberal than radical, but who, in any case, see that the terms for understanding contemporary consciousness in an age of digital reproductive technologies are terms essentially set up by a range of radical thinkers and the plurality of political movements they come out of. The triumph of the Right in the U.S., England, Canada and elsewhere in the 80s has been partly due to an immense power and some talent at manipulating the media environment. Its sore point in the 1990s may well be a generation of students facing diminished expectations and a lower standard of living than their parents being taught communications, not the classics, by leftists

and liberals, feminists and internationalists, gays, lesbians, and other-gendered persons, Blacks and Latinos, and all the rest of the "cultural literacy" nightmare. The possibilities are interesting, to say the least.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)